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# A Poetic Landscape for the Next Millennium

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## Synopsis

When asked to deliver the Charles Eliot Norton Poetry Lectures at Harvard about the future of literature, Calvino came up with six qualities depicting each one through several literary examples. He titled them “Six Memos for the Next Millennium.”

Similarly, we recognise several architectural sensations resulting from a composition of expressive qualities that are transversal to several works of architecture, independently of their typologies, construction techniques, materials, although these elements enter into the aesthetic composition.

Central to our argument is the link established by Deleuze & Guattari between territory, matters of expression and the composition of sensations to define what we name of “Poetic Landscape,” following the idea of the becoming-expressive of the territory and how the territorial marks and the territory-house system are at the origin of art.

We will analyse a landscape located in the cold and icy lands through the presentation of works by Peter Zumthor in order to contribute to the notion of Poetic Landscape addressing the values and qualities for the next millennium.

**Key words:** Poetic Landscape, Aesthetics, Sensation, Zumthor, Deleuze.



When asked to deliver the Charles Eliot Norton Poetry Lectures at Harvard about the future of literature in the upcoming millennium, Italo Calvino came up with six values or qualities in literature: lightness, quickness, exactitude, visibility, multiplicity, and consistency. He depicted each one (except the last one as he died before finishing the essay) through several literary examples to which he felt particularly connected. The Cuban-Italian author titled them “Six Memos for the Next Millennium” as for him literature was universal, independently of national languages, and timeless, independently of any epoch.

Similarly, we recognise several architectural sensations resulting from a composition of expressive qualities (matters of expression) – namely the sensations of intimacy, silence, and contemplation – that are transversal to several works of architecture of different epochs, independently of their typologies, construction techniques, materials, although these elements, as in a work of art, are part of the aesthetic composition (though appearing already metamorphosed). Sensations have a direct action and impact on our nervous system, obeying our bodies to mould to the space as we are invaded by the power and effects of sensations unfold in and by the differences in intensity. Philosophically speaking and following a Deleuzian idea: the sensation holds a paradoxical character, it is what cannot be sensed, because it reaches the limit of sensibility (of what our bodies can bear) and, at the same time, it is what can only be sensed and never explained outside of what is sensed.

Central to our argument is the link established by Deleuze & Guattari between territory, matters of expression and the composition of sensations to define what we name of “Poetic Landscape,” a borrowed title from an unrealised project that Peter Zumthor had made in collaboration with a literature group in Detmold in the years of 1998 and 1999 (Fig.1). Zumthor believes that the project did not die at that moment as it is still showing signs of life. There is, for example, an obvious link between the projects Zumthor had made for the Poetic Landscape and the *Bruder Klaus Kapelle*. However, most importantly, the project allowed him to think differently about the relation between architecture and landscape as expressed in two main texts: “Houses for Poems,” written for a lecture presented at the 9th literature meeting in Schwalenberg in 2001, and “Architecture and Landscape,” an addendum to a new edition of *Thinking Architecture*.



Figure 1.

The Poetic Landscape project by Zumthor and both his texts allow us in turn to think about the relation between architecture, philosophy and art, and the common problematics of the composition of sensations in space. As a philosophical category (coined by us), Poetic Landscape has its roots in Deleuze & Guattari's idea of the becoming-expressive of the territory and how the territorial marks and the territory-house system are at the origin of art. As the authors comment: "Perhaps art begins within the animal, at least with the animal that carves out a territory and constructs a house [...]. The territory-house system transforms a number of organic functions - sexuality, procreation, aggression, feeding. But this transformation does not explain the appearance of the territory and the house; rather, it is the other way around: the territory implies the emergence of pure sensory qualities, of *sensibilia* that cease to be merely functional and become expressive features, making possible a transformation of function."<sup>1</sup> For these authors, we can only call territory when it presents these expressive features.

A Poetic Landscape is thus a type of landscape, a constructed land-scape, that implies a different way of looking, perceiving and understanding landscape using sensibility and intuition as modes of perception in order to extract from the landscape its traces of expression, its lines of force, the sensations it composes, its materials and their inner composition (almost like the fibers of a tissue), but, most importantly, it means a transformation, when all these forces, lines and materials are metamorphosed into matters of expression of a work of architecture through the architect / artist composition (land artists are quite familiar with these processes and Zumthor is close to them on this point).

Our current research focuses six vast landscapes (six landscapes for the next millennium) from the cold and icy lands to the tropical islands and the desert. The landscapes are selected due to their unique characteristics, their natural diversity, and sometimes extreme conditions providing important data to future uses of resources and promote sustainable use of the ecosystems and endogenous processes. It is urgent to map these landscapes in turn of their singularities, *haecceities*, weather, techniques, traditions, rituals, and the natural and human processes embedded within them as these characteristics are metamorphosed into the built work as matters of expression (the work's aesthetic composition) in order to compose a certain sensation (Figs. 2, 3).

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<sup>1</sup> Deleuze & Guattari, *What is philosophy?* New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, p. 183.



Figure 2.



Figure 3.

Consequently, there is a necessary connection between a Poetic Landscape and the work of architecture that preserves a block of sensations. We will analyse part of one of the six vast landscapes, located in the cold and icy lands through the presentation of examples of works by Peter Zumthor privileging the Steilneset Memorial in Vardø as this work and landscape were already objects of a first expedition. (Fig.4) The expedition presupposes an “art aid” kit, containing filmic, literary and other artistic references (important to understand how a certain sensation is composed through different artistic practices departing from the same landscape – for example, how Tarkovsky exposes the house from *The Sacrifice* to the elements finds its resonance in the Steilneset Memorial, being Tarkovsky one of Zumthor’s references as well), and

a complex bibliography spanning from philosophy to neurology with the aim of collecting all the data that enter into the composition of the sensation. These elements can only be recollected *in situ* after long periods of observation, across different seasons, resembling a nomadic and scientific scrutiny where the body becomes a resonance box, registering the dissonances, turning points, and thresholds of the sensation.

In the end, through architecture and the depiction of how specific architectural sensations are composed *in* and *through* space, we will be able to contribute to the (philosophical, architectural and artistic) concept of Poetic Landscape addressing the values and qualities for the next millennium: to inhabit poetically the world.



Figure 4.

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## Biography

**Susana Ventura.** (Coimbra, 1978) architect, curator and postdoctoral researcher in Theory of Architecture and Aesthetics (Philosophy). Currently, she is developing a postdoctoral research project *Towards an intensive architecture: how to compose sensations in architecture*, at The Faculty of Architecture of the University of Porto. Within this project, she was awarded the Fernando Távora's Prize, in 2014, comprising an expedition to Japan, Switzerland, Austria, the Czech Republic, Sweden, and Norway.

She holds a Ph.D. in Philosophy (Aesthetics) from the Faculty of Social and Human Sciences of Nova University Lisbon (FCSH-UNL, 2013), under scientific supervision of José Gil, a renowned philosopher (close to Deleuze), with the thesis *Architecture's Body without Organs*, which included research residences at the architecture studios of Diller Scofidio + Renfro (New York), Lacaton & Vassal (Paris) and Peter Zumthor (Haldenstein), and for which she has received a four-year Ph.D. grant provided by FCT, Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (2007-2011). She is also an architect graduated from Coimbra University (darq – FCTUC, 2003).